How to Love
Luke 7:36-50
October 17, 1971
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Has it ever happened to you? Have you ever fallen in love with someone and not known how to give expression to your feelings? Not just romantically, although that is perhaps the kind of love we think about first here. But have you ever found yourself feeling so strongly about another person that your feelings actually scared you, and when you tried to express it - in a card or a gift, or verbally - face to face - you discovered that nothing could get the job done?

That's the issue in the story of Mary Magdalene. She once loved a man, a different kind of man; and her love for him brought about such a change in herself that she seemed like someone else. She was frightened by her own feelings, scared by this man who was so totally different from all the other men she had ever known.

Her song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him", became very popular not long ago as part of the rock opera, "Jesus Christ Superstar". And that, in itself is an incredible phenomenon. It has been talked about and debated; praised and criticized by religious and secular journalists. And it is not my purpose this morning to add to the volume of that particular discussion. It was written by two young men who are not Christians, and the opera ends on a note devoid of hope. And yet, it spoke to a lot of people - in a way that all the traditional religious music stopped doing fifty years ago. It became an important part of one of the most significant movements of our time - the rennaisance of the Gospel within youth culture. Kids are "turning on" to Jesus.

In any case, Mary's song became popular as a part of that larger movement in our culture. But also, I think, because her song dramatically pinpoints a very important question: "How to Love Him?" That, I would suggest, has always been a question; in terms of somehow loving Jesus in an authentic,

honest way as individual, twentieth century Christians; but also in terms of interpersonal relations. That is, "How to love anyone?", wives, husbands, parents, children, friends and strangers.

The story of Mary Magdalene can be a case study at this point. So let's look again at who she was and what role she plays in the Gospel narrative. The first problem in putting the story together is that there are no fewer than six Mary's mentioned in the New Testament. Some of them do very similar things in the different Gospels, and there has always been a lingering suspicion in the minds of New Testament scholars, that at least several of these Mary's are one and the same person. There has also been a lingering tradition that Mary Magdalene was, in fact, the nameless prostitute whose story is told in our New Testament Lesson this morning. There is no way to prove it - nor is there any way to disprove it.

What we do know is this. Mary Magdalene was one of several women who became a part of the entourage that followed Jesus around Galilee for about three years. At some point Jesus had healed her of a lingering ailment, described in the Bible as "casting out seven demons." After that she apparently became a devoted follower, who not only accompanied him but also contributed financially to the venture. She was among those who went to Jerusalem with him on the first day of the Passover for his final and dramatic appeal to the nation. She lived through all the events of the climactic week, and again was one of those who was conspicuously present at his crucifixion. She came to his tomb early in the morning on the very first day after the Sabbath, she reported the fact of the empty tomb to the others, and shortly thereafter, in the garden, alone with her bewildered grief, became the first person to experience the greatest truth of Christian faith - the reality of the Resurrection.

Now, those are pretty impressive credentials, but there are still a lot of unanswered questions. Who was she? Where did she come from? What

was the nature of her illness? "Jesus Christ Superstar" in Mary's song "I Don't Know How to Love Him" suggests that she was a prostitute, and as I mentioned there is some precedent for identifying Mary Magdalene with the woman in Luke 7. That's speculation, of course, but it is responsible speculation. Using that, and other information, a more complete story emerges.

Her name tells us that she was from Magdala, a small town in the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Archeologists and historians tell us that Magdala was a very interesting place. It was primarily a Gentile town: the religious artifacts doscovered at the site are mostly pagan. It was the hub of a lot of commercial activity; farming, fishing, fish curing, ship building and trading. The relative wealth of Magdala is revealed in a curious little historical anecdote: when the Romans collected their taxes, the money was shipped from Magdala by the wagon load, rather than horse back. Because of its dominant pagan populace, Magdala was a wide open town, with a reputation for the best and most available prostitutes in the area; more or less the Calumet City of the Sea of Galilee. There was plenty of business - Roman soldiers on leave from Jerusalem, sailors at port, farmers in town to trade - and to have a fling before returning home. When Magdala was destroyed the Rabbi's recorded their conviction that the tragedy was the result of the city's notorious licentousness.

So we have a little girl growing up there - in a rich, lively, open town with a flourishing prostitution industry - which if contemporary indication are valid - means that a good precentage of the cash flow came about as a result of this particular business venture. A little girl, growing up there - as part of a despised minority in her own community - a community under the thumb of the arrogant Romans who held all of them - Jews and Gentiles in utter disdain.

Perhaps she did fall. Perhaps the young Mary, physically attractive now, assessed the whole situation carefully and concluded that prostitution

was not too bad after all, and that it would certainly be lucrative. But nothing was so abhorrent to the Jewish community as prostitution: and the price Mary paid was the total rejection of her family, her people, her synogag, her whole past. They said she had a demon - she was sick - literally sick - physically and spiritually sick. So sick, in fact, that they said she had seven demons - which simply indicates a recurring or particularly severe affliction in the medical idiom of the first century.

Then one day Mary met another man, out of Nazareth, thirtish, young and attractive. But she had never encountered one like this before. This one, by the name of Jesus, was scary. He didn't want what all the others had wanted. He didn't ask her for anything - not what her clientle asked, not even what her own family asked. He simply saw her as a person - a woman - a whole human being. And suddenly she found herself feeling both worse and better about herself than she had ever felt before. Guilt, remorse, love, pride, cynicism, affection - got all mixed up in her mind and she found herself doing something altogether new - opening up, and talking. She didn't have to tell him that she was all mixed up, that she had sinned. He already knew that - and somehow could get by that to understand her - and touch her as a person with dignity and worth and value.

Suddenly she - Mary - mattered to someone. Was that the "casting out of the seven devils". I prefer to think so. Suddenly she was healed by the unconditional love and acceptance of this very strange man. And when he left and her next business engagement began, she couldn't do it. But what does a reformed prostitute do in Magdala. Mary decided quickly. She packed her belongings - the tools of her trade - the vulgar clothing - even the semi-precious perfume and set out to find him in Galilee.

She caught up with him at - of all places - the home of a respected Pharisee, where he was the guest for a banquet. And when she saw him again all the agony and self recrimmination and guilt and love came to the surface. Bursting into tears she threw herself at his feet - and took that symbol of

all that was past - that alabaster jar of perfume and poured it over them.

It was an impulsive , extravagant thing to do, terribly embarrassing to the very respectable host. It's significance would have been lost on everyone except Jesus. The host, trying to be gracious, suggested that Jesus didn't know who and what she was (men of the cloth don't know about these things?) But in the ensuing conversation Jesus played it straight and revealed that he was the only one who really knew who she was - manely a person. In Mark's account of the incident he rebukes his host's offended sense of propriety with the remark: "It is a fine and beautiful thing she has done."

So she followed him - through Galilee, and into the city of Jerusalem right up to the foot of his cross. And when he died - she kept following to the tomb - and her following resulted in the confirmation of all he had done for her. He was not dead - He was still with her - the change in her was for real - she was a new person - she was really healed - love and forgiveness and grace were the lasting realities. And at that point Mary fades into history, and the speculation stops. And I confess that as I prepared this I wanted to stop and let the incredible beauty of her story speak for itself. Therefore I would not be offended if you turned me off at this juncture and lived a while with your own thoughts. But my own sense of propriety won't let me do that - so allow me to think out loud, and share with you where the story of Mary Magdalene leads me.

I see a lot of what is common to all men and women in Mary's story. I have come to understand that all of us, in this culture and at this time, suffer from a lack of self-esteem. I have come to that conclusion from personal counseling, from reading and studying and talking with people involved in the psychological disciplines. To use the latest psychiatric jargon, we are taught as soon as we are born that we are"not OK" - you're not OK - nobdy's OK - which is the kind of cynicism expressed in the life of prostitution: or that "I'm OK but you're not OK" which is the kind of

disregard for others that results in racial bigotry, ultimately murder, but more commonly in old fashioned selfishness.

I've come to the conclusion that somehow we have these built -in bad feelings about ourselves, that we unconsciously build them into our children, that we live out our lives playing all kinds of games, the purpose of which is to make us feel OK about ourselves. And I've come to believe that one of the structures of our society that reinforces these negative self-feelings - that supports our lack of self esteem - is none other than institutionalized Christianity. For there is no doubt that a lot of what goes under the name of Gospel in our society assumes that you have to feel bad before you can feel good: that you are not only a hopeless sinner - but that God is against you and not for you - until you can somehow confront and articulate your own rottoness. There is not doubt that a lot of what goes under the name of religion - maybe most of it - is not Good News at all, but very bad new.

And as I apply what I sense about us and our religious situation - to what I see transpiring between Jesus and people like that forlorn woman kneeling at his feet - I want to say very clearly that the basic thing the Gospel has to say to you and me - is good. It is really Good News. It is that Jesus Christ means God loves you - and understands you - and accepts you just as you are. Jesus accepted that woman. And we need to be very careful here. He didn't condone her behavior: he did not encourage her to continue: but - he did not insist that she conjure up all her bad feelings - he did not force her to repent as a condition for his forgiveness. He simply cut through all that and accepted her, and that acceptance prompted her repentance and her confession: that acceptance, which was extended to her before she did a thing, was what healed her and made her stand up and walk in a new direction. That acceptance scared her - but it did more than that, - it enabled her - to love - to show her love - to weep tears of love - to pour out the perfume.

We can't feel good about anything until we feel good about ourselves.

We can't love anybody until we esteem and value and - literally - love ourselves. It's that simple - and it is that which the Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses in each one of us.

The late Paul Tillich, said it this way. "Being forgiven and being able to accept oneself are one and the same thing . . . In the midst of our futile attempts to make ourselves worthy . . . we are suddenly grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven, and the fire of love begins to burn. That is the greatest experience anyone can have. It may not happen often, but when it does happen, it decides and transforms everything." [The New Being, p. 12]

That's what happened to Mary. She was grasped by the certainty of forgiveness, and the fire of love began to burn. That's what we presume to reconstruct weekly as we engage in corporate confession. We confess because we know God loves and accepts us. We confess because the news is good - really good - in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. That means "you're OK and I'm OK" and we can look each other in the eye and love each other because we are accepted by God himself. That means we are free to love - husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and strangers - because we are loved. That means that we -- even you and I - can give the gift of grace to each other: to heal each other.

How to love? By hearing - perhaps for the first time - the best of all possible news: that we are loved by God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Father, we spend a lot of time feeling bad about ourselves. Help us really to hear - and really to know that you love us. And then be with us as we tentatively try to love each other, honestly, unconditionally: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.